

The Dangers of Unmanaged Stress

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There are two types of stress. The first type is acute stress. That's the kind where your body senses danger and adapts to the threat by making physical changes, which enable you to quickly get out of harms way. This occurs because your body secretes chemicals and stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. These chemicals are secreted in response to your thoughts and cause your body to prepare for "fight or flight."

For example, let's say you are crossing the street and you notice a car quickly approaching. You see the car, which causes you to feel fear and anxiety. Your body then adapts to the stress by secreting chemicals and hormones, which send messages to your heart, lungs and organs in order to prepare them to handle your crisis. Your heart rate increases, blood flow is diverted to muscles allowing for quick movement, your pupils dilate and more oxygen flows through your lungs for an extra burst of energy.

These changes allow you to react quickly, enabling you to jump onto the curb to safety. Within a short period of time your body calms down and things return to normal. This protective mechanism is crucial to your safety and is designed to protect you against danger.

The other type of stress is called chronic stress. With chronic stress, chemicals and hormones, which were only intended to be secreted for a short period of time, are continually being released. The stress response is engaged and never turned off. Glands, which secrete these chemicals, don't have an opportunity to replenish or restore themselves to pre stress levels. Your body remains in a state of hyper arousal and hormones, which are meant to help and protect you, are over secreted and eventually depleted. It's like turning on the shower at full force and leaving it on. Eventually, you're going to run out of hot water.

Stress and the immune system are very closely linked. Your immune system maintains internal harmony within your body. When it is healthy and strong, it is in fighting shape to protect you against unwanted invasion. One of the biggest dangers with chronic stress is that the over secretion of chemicals suppresses your immune system. When this occurs, your body doesn't have the ability to fight off invaders as effectively, so you have less protection against illness, stress related conditions and disease. The immune system is directly affected by the way we handle stress. If it's strong, it offers us protection, if it is weak; it is unable to fight for us. (Have you ever noticed how you may get a respiratory infection when you're under a lot of stress? The stress you were under

caused a release of stress hormones, which weakened your immune system and couldn't protect you against the invader).

Stress hormones and chemicals are released according to the way we think, feel and act. The way we think, feel and act is based on our ideas, beliefs, value system, religious upbringing, personality, culture and past conditioning. All of these variables determine how we are affected by stress because they create how we view the world around us. One event can be viewed so differently by two people depending on their perspective. For example, have you ever noticed how two people can view traffic? One person can be seen banging their steering wheel, cursing and flooding in a sea of stress induced hormones. The other person can be seen catching up on phone calls, listening to music and enjoying a quiet moment. It's the same event for both, but how the event is regarded is completely different and is based on the way each one interprets the event. While we are all affected by stress differently, people who are better equipped to handle the stressors in their lives are the ones who enjoy the greatest health and wellness benefits. Their bodies aren't continually releasing stress hormones, which are causing immune system damage along with other bodily wear and tear.

When these chemicals are being constantly secreted, over time they can also cause stress induced conditions, illness and disease because they alter the chemistry of your cells while weakening your immune system. When hormones such as cortisol are depleted, autoimmune diseases can occur and conditions like arthritis are common. When levels are abnormal, other problems arise. Sleep quality, skin disorders, infertility, anxiety and delayed healing are all common when stress hormones are out of balance.

Stress also affects the nervous system, which is directly tied to the digestive system. Ever notice how you many feel gassy, bloated or like you haven't fully digested when you scarf down lunch? Your body interpreted the stress you were feeling and decided that it was more important to prepare you for the perceived battle than to effectively digest your meal. Digestive disturbances are so widespread that they are now the largest emergency room complaint. Conditions like reflux, irritable bowel syndrome and ulcers are all so common and can all be tied to stress.

If things weren't bad enough, stress also causes us to age more quickly. This happens when cortisol is over secreted, there isn't enough and more needs to be produced. Levels are regained by borrowing chemicals from your estrogen stores, which are needed to help retain youth and vitality. Have you even noticed someone and thought, "Wow, that person looks like they've had a hard life." The way they've handled their stress is written all over them.

When you thought things couldn't get worse, stress can also make you overweight! Here's what happens. When you're stressed the stress hormones are released and increase your appetite for high fat, high calorie foods. You then eat those foods and those are the foods, which encourage the release of stress hormones! It's an endless cycle leading to the over secretion of stress hormones, weight gain and frustration. These hormones also encourage fat to be stored in your abdominal region, increase the amount of glucose floating around in your blood and lay the groundwork for insulin resistance, diabetes, high cholesterol and hypertension. So, the stress you interpret encourages you to eat foods that make you heavier, which causes the release of more chemicals. If you're an emotional eater, you're in even bigger trouble. Now you've added extra eating as way to self medicate to feel better from your stress. You may choose foods high in fat and carbohydrates, which give you a boost of the feel good chemical serotonin. This lifts you up but then drops you hard and you are left with less energy than before. At this point, you're left with your original stress, the feelings regarding your eating habits, excess weight, a starting point for illness or disease and stress hormones on a rampage.

It's important to realize that the stress response was designed to be effective when used for short-term safety. Unfortunately, those same chemicals, which protect you from immediate danger, hurt you when they continue to be released. To make matters worse, the body doesn't know if the stress is real or merely imagined. It will secrete stress hormones whether you're grieving over the death of a loved one, reacting to your kids making you crazy or replaying the pain, hurt or argument you had with your mother ten years ago.

We often don't realize how the stress we feel can lead to a physical response. It may be easier to accept that a physical response is due to a physical cause. For example, you stub your toe, you scream out in pain. But think of this. You hear something embarrassing or something that makes you angry. The message is heard and interpreted by you according to the way you've learned to think, feel and act. As a result, you turn beet red or blush! If you're nervous about something, you may feel "butterflies" or your hands may get clammy. If you're angry you may feel "your blood boil", you may have a "sour stomach" or you may feel heat coming off of you. All of these examples are physical reactions to emotions. The message was heard, interpreted, chemicals were secreted and you had a physical reaction to the message. That's just one incidence!

Now imagine the stress of parenting, trying to be a good partner, coworker, child, sibling, friend or neighbor. Add the need to be perfect, liked, approved, admired and respected. Mix it with the stress, strain and anxiety of past hurts, grievances and negative feelings stemming from an outlook or

perspective that doesn't serve you well. What have you got? A recipe for stress related conditions, illness and disease. While this may seem frightening, the beauty is you are in a wonderful position to stop the stress response. Remember, your stress may not change. What can change however is the way you choose to react to it.



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